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ABSTRACT

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Belief in Rape Myths:

The Role of Gender, Attitudes Toward Women and Knowledge of Rape

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Belief in Rape Myths:

The Role of Gender, Attitudes Toward Women and Knowledge of Rape

Few issues create as much discussion as does the topic of heterosexual rape. It is a working assumption in this paper that the widely divergent views of rape one can observe in our society are related to differences in factual knowledge of rape and to differences in the degree to which people endorse certain myths about rape. In support of this assumption other authors have argued that factual knowledge of rape is related to peoples' attitudes toward rape victims and offenders (Feild, 1978; MacKellar, 1975; Medea & Thompson, 1974) but no empirical evidence has been gathered on the relation of factual knowledge of rape and degree of belief in rape myths.

It has also been suggested elsewhere that there are large gender differences in endorsement of rape myths. Brownmiller (1975) has offered an historical outline of the ideology of rape suggesting that men endorse rape myths more than women. For example, she has labeled such statements as, "No woman can be raped against her will." and "All women want to be raped." (p. 311) as constituting commonly held myths about rape. Indeed she goes on to comment about these myths saying, "... they are the beliefs that most men hold." (p. 312). Moreover, Brownmiller (1975) has argued that belief in such myths has led to derogation of rape victims, problems in the adjudication of rapists, and the repression of women through insensitive rape laws. Similar arguments have been made by other authors in the area (e.g., Russell, 1975; LeGrand, 1975).

Despite these "feminist" arguments, an understanding of the relation of degree of belief in rape myths, factual knowledge of rape, and gender is needed for at least two reasons. The first reason is the development of a theory of rape. Recently there has been a great deal of empirical research on the topic of rape. Unfortunately, most of it has been ad hoc. A theory of rape would provide some organization for this important activity and increase the probability of consistent, meaningful findings. Secondly, a practical benefit of understanding the relations among the three variables cited above could be the design of rape prevention programs designed to modify beliefs in rape myths and to educate potential victims, offenders, and members of the criminal justice system concerning the facts about rape.

The lack of a theory of rape and of previous research on degree of belief in rape myths and correlates of these beliefs made it difficult to formulate specific hypotheses. However, if many of the previously cited authors are correct about the existence of a rape ideology, one might expect the following:

1. Males will endorse rape myths to a greater degree than females.
2. "Liberated" people will endorse rape myths to a lesser degree than "unliberated" people.
3. Knowldege of rape facts will be negatively related to endorsement of rape myths.

Method

Participants

The participants were 118 male and 126 female undergraduates who participated for extra credit in their Psychology courses. One-third of the sample came from the University of New Hampshire, a small eastern school; one-third came from Drake University, a small private midwestern school; and one-third came from Iowa State University, a large midwestern state school.

Measures

The participants responded to the following three sets of items: the Myth Scale, the Fact Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. The Myth Scale involved five items (see Table 1) that the participants responded to using a 1 (Disagree) to 99 (Agree) response scale with 50 anchored with Uncertain or No Opinion. The items for this scale came from Brownmiller (1975). The Fact Scale involved eight forced choice questions about rape statistics (see Table 2). These items were written following Feild's (1978) procedure of using major sources in the area (e.g., Curtis, 1974; Uniform Crime Reports, 1975). After responding to the Myth and Fact Scales, each participant filled out the short form of Spence and Helmreich's (1972) Attitudes Toward Women Scale using the 1 to 99 response format.

Design and Analysis

Prior to analysis, the participants' responses to the Myth Scale were added together after reflecting question number five, the number of correct answers to the Fact Scale was found, and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale was scored so that a higher score

indicated a more liberal view of the role of women in society. The mean and standard deviation for the whole sample on this scale were (1782.50 and 402.27), respectively. For the males these values were (1677.40 and 402.62), while for females they were (1898.47 and 370.21). The participants were then classified as liberal or unliberal on the basis of their scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. A separate median split was used for the males and females since the females were generally more liberal than the males and this procedure resulted in approximately equal numbers of males and females who were classified as liberal and unliberal. Scores on the Fact Scale were then used as a covariate in a 2 (male, female) by 2 (liberal, unliberal) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of the Myth Scale scores.

Results

The mean degree of agreement with the items on the Myth Scale adjusted for scores on the Fact Scale as a function of participant gender and classification according to scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Sclae appears in Figure 1. The ANCOVA results indicated an effect of the covariate, F (1, 239) = 13.21, $p < .0001$, with the relation between the Myth and Fact Scales being negative as expected (Beta = -11.22). Scores from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale were also negatively related to scores on the Myth Scale, r (242) = -.37, $p < .001$, but not to scores on the Fact Scale, r (242) = .04, ns, indicating the assumptions of the ANCOVA were probably not violated by the median split procedure. The ANCOVA also showed a main effect of participant

gender, F (1, 239) = 9.58, $p < .002$, and a main effect of classification on the basis of Attitudes Toward Women Scale scores, F (1, 239) = 35.24, $p < .0001$. Inspection of Figure 1 indicates these effects were consistent in form with the hypotheses.

Discussion

The present results support the general assumption that a rape ideology exists which involves components of belief in rape myths, factual knowledge of rape, gender, and attitudes toward women as a group. People who held a liberal view of women were found to disagree with rape myths more than people who held an unliberated view of women, females disagreed with rape myths more than males, and factual knowledge of rape was negatively related to agreement with rape myths as predicted.

With regard to attitudes about women, feminists have argued that there are relationships between perceptions of women and perceptions of rape victims and offenders that define a rape ideology. In support of this view, the present results suggest that beliefs and assumptions about rape may partially rest on traditional views of the roles of women in society. However, factual knowledge of rape may also play an important role in a rape ideology as does gender. Gender differences in views of rape are nothing new, but the notion of factual knowledge of rape being a component of a rape ideology suggests that "consciousness raising" in the form of education about the facts of rape may provide an opportunity to limit the generality of any rape ideology that may exist. The inclusion of a unit on rape in popular human sexuality courses

around the country combined with workshops given by counselors from rape crisis centers may help remove the psychological structure a rape ideology rests upon. However, a note of caution is in order. Further research involving experimental studies of the effects of education about rape on beliefs and assumptions about rape is required before the associations among the variables studied in this investigation can be accepted completely.

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Table 1

Questions Comprising the Rape Myth Scale[a]

The primary motive for rape is sexual.

Women actually enjoy rape.

Rapists are perverted and/or sexually unfulfilled men.

No healthy woman can be raped because she is able to prevent it.

Any woman, regardless of age, race or social status, can be and is raped.

[a]All responses were made on a 1 (Disagree) to 99 (Agree) response scale with 50 anchored with Uncertain or No Opinion.

Table 2

Questions Comprising the Rape Fact Scale[a]

At least __% of reported rapes are caused by the victim's behavior.

0, 4, 8

Research indicates that a rape occurs every ___ minutes.

2, 12, 22

Research shows that ___tenths of all rapes are committed in the victim's home.

1, 3, 5

It is estimated that ___ committed rapes are reported.

1 in 10, 1 in 5, 1 in 2

Research shows that ___% of all rapes are planned in advance.

40, 70, 100

Recent evidence suggests that ___% of all rape victims receive no cuts or bruises, do not require a doctor's attention, or require hospitalization.

25, 50, 75

It is estimated that one in every ___ women will be raped.

100, 1,000, 10,000

Recent evidence indicates that in ___% of reported rapes the victim is acquainted with the offender.

25, 50, 75

[a]The possible answers to each question appear under the question.

In all cases the middle answer is correct.

Figure 1

Mean Agreement with Rape Myths Adjusted for Fact Scale Scores as a Function of Participant Gender and Attitudes Toward Women